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OUR OPINION

WKU scholarship changes a positive step

1 hr ago

Graph courtesy of the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy

When it comes to college affordability, Kentucky comes in near the bottom.

In fact, our state was ranked eighth worst in the nation last year, according to a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, an anti-poverty research group.

Year after year – in the wake of a 35 percent cut to state spending on higher education since 2008 – leaders at our public universities wring their hands and pass the difference onto students in the form of tuition increases.

That's why it was such a breath of fresh air Tuesday when Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni announced several changes to the university's scholarship offerings designed in part to free up dollars for needier students.

Beginning next fall, WKU will expand scholarship offers to students with a 3.0 high school grade-point average, boost the minimum dollar amount of the awards and no longer use ACT scores as a factor in most of its merit-based aid for incoming freshmen.

The move isn't completely altruistic, of course. It's pretty clear that WKU is looking for an edge in a crowded higher education market.

However, WKU's effort to stretch its limited amount of resources is laudable. While the university could certainly cut the fat in some areas, we believe in giving credit where credit is due.

And the state has a responsibility to adequately fund its public universities and community colleges. As state dollars for higher education decline, the difference has to come from somewhere, and too often it falls on the backs of cash-strapped students and their families. Student debt continues to rise.

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According to a recent brief on the issue compiled by the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, students graduating with debt (both public and private) jumped from 52 percent to 64 percent between 2004 and 2017. The average debt load also increased from \$14,250 to \$28,447.

The changes WKU announced this week will mean more opportunities for minority students. The university is boosting and expanding its Cornelius A. Martin Scholarship awards, which target those students.

Clearly, universities can be a part of the college affordability solution. The incentives – and thus support from the state – just need to catch up.

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